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JASON AND TH

● It's not yet summer but already the Album Of The Year has landed on Earth. 'Ladies And Gentlemen We Are Floating In Space' is SPIRITUALIZED's extraordinary adventure into drugs (maybe) and love lost (possibly). So where has JASON PIERCE's head been to get this dark? JAMES OLDHAM goes, like, out there, man, to find out, while JOHN MULVEY orbits the Spaceman's greatest hits. Rocket man: MIKE DIVER

The latest Spiritualized album is such a document of romantic despair that it rips at the heart and lodges in the spine. It's a record that manages to touch the outer extremities of both human experience and imaginable sound; an album riddled with the blackest themes but the brightest innovation; an album, in short, already destined to be *the* record of the year.

'Ladies And Gentleman We Are Floating In Space' is a classic – in the tradition of Captain Beefheart's 'Clear Spot' or Sly Stone's 'There's A Riot Goin' On', but entirely removed from either of them. This is the sound of molten heat flowing alongside chilled water, of exploding brass colliding with classical strings, of vast gospel choirs floating above discordant jazz noise and of sinister voodoo rhythms heralding inconsolable heartbreak.

And once you've travelled past the extraordinary noise, there's an even darker core. Lyrically, this is Spiritualized's (and therefore Jason's) most direct record to date. 'Ladies And Gentlemen…' is an album dominated by two towering (and often repeated) themes: of a love abruptly ended and of the desperate attempts to cope with the resulting hollowness.

"I just don't need the press badly enough to talk about my life in that way. I'm not like Dave Gahan, I don't want therapy through the *NME*."

That songs such as 'Broken Heart' and 'Stay With Me' are concerned with the demise of a relationship is beyond doubt, that the character at the heart of this album seeks solace through drugs (and particularly heroin) is also beyond question. But whether these songs are autobiographical, whether they represent an emotional nadir for Jason Pierce reached at some point in the last 24 months, isn't quite so apparent. And it isn't something he wishes to be drawn on.

The hotel room is a mess. Jason Pierce lights another cigarette and smiles. Inhaling a lungful of smoke, he surveys the scene. Scattered across the floor is the debris of hours of conversation, empty cigarette packets lie stacked on the sideboard, discarded wine bottles surround the bed.

His eyes, however, remain as bright and piercing as they were four hours ago. Again the question is asked, and again he glances over at the window and sighs. He's never going to tell you about that. If you want to know about the last two years of his life, then listen to his new album. Because over and above that he has no further comment to make. Even if you lock him in this room for a week.

"I don't think any of that matters," he explains again. "You can ask it in a hundred different ways, but I'm not going to talk about it with you. I've got no interest in any of those things. It's not my angle on the album.

"You're pursuing a line of questioning as if you want just one line out of me. You just want me to say, 'Yes, I really did feel bad,' but I'm not, I'm not going to say anything. I've already said all I want to say about those things.

"Life isn't that simple. Life can never be reduced to some soundbites for the *NME*. The thing is, I'm never going to break down, because I've got no reason to."

There's silence. Jason pulls out another cigarette and reaches for the phone. It's 4am.

In this hotel room in the tranquil surroundings of Laycott, ten minutes from Bristol, all inquiries are met with half-clues and denials, smiles and an occasional cackle. For Jason, such personal matters are irrelevant, they're details that only serve to negate the value of the whole. The stories surrounding a record are not something that concern him.

"I'm not interested in how many Quaaludes Iggy was taking," he insists quietly. "I don't want to hear about Keith Moon's excess or Jerry Lee Lewis', because I can hear it in the music. I like the Hunter S Thompson line, 'If I really got up to all that I'd be dead by now.'

"I just don't need the press badly enough to talk about my life in that way. I'm not like Dave Gahan, I don't want therapy through the *NME*. It's a shame that in the space of one interview more people are going to get a chance to form an opinion of me than are ever going to listen to our records."

The 12 songs originally meant to have succeeded Spiritualized's second album, 'Pure Phase', were written and lost while the band were touring America in 1995. Bar a few scrawled notes on motel stationery, Jason returned to England having totally forgotten the songs and with no idea where he'd placed the tape on which he'd recorded stretches his influences and prodigious talents for arrangements to transcendental ends, dividing the CD into four separate movements, demanding absolute concentration and devotion from his listeners. At the time, it seemed as if he, Bobby Gillespie and My Bloody Valentine's Kevin Shields were crafting genuinely new music from their myriad influences, creating potent '90s psychedelia. But the Scream went retro, the Valentines disappeared indefinitely into the studio, and only Spiritualized stayed true to the vision.

LADIES AND GENTLEMEN...

SPIRITUALIZED'S LONG, STRANGE JOURNEY TO '...FLOATING IN SPACE'

SPACEMEN 3
Recurring *(Fire LP, 1991)*
PEERLESS PIONEERS of opiated, blues-tinged drone rock in the '80s, Spacemen 3 were as well-known for sitting down at gigs and their shameless drug propaganda as they were for minimalist, staggeringly beautiful music. By '91, however, the band's two pivots refused to communicate with each other. Hence this final LP: Side One is Sonic Boom solo, experimenting a little with acid house; Side Two is Jason Pierce and the remaining band members – already working together as Spiritualized – producing a rough template of their later wonders. 'Hypnotized', a staple of the early Spiritualized set, remains one of Jason's most adrenalised, euphoric songs.

SPIRITUALIZED
Feel So Sad
(Dedicated single, 1991)
EARLY SPIRITUALIZED singles, on the whole, were adapted cover versions (of songs by JJ Cale, The Troggs, Lou Reed and John Cale's pre-Velvets band, The Primitives) testing out the new sound. 'Feel So Sad', their second single, was the astonishing exception: a 13-minute symphonic swirl with countless different mood-swings, the best part of an orchestra playing along, and a sky-scraping sense of ambition. 'Ladies And Gentlemen…''s alchemical fusing of melancholic lyrics and triumphal, spiritual music has its foundations here.

SPIRITUALIZED
Lazer-Guided Melodies
(Dedicated LP, 1992)
A LANDMARK album, as Jason

SPIRITUALIZED
Medication
(Dedicated single, 1992)
LET'S ROCK! "*Every day I wake up and I take my medication/ Spend the rest of the day waiting for it to wear off.*" sings Jason, before predictably claiming the song *isn't* about drugs, while the band kick up a gear like a born-again MC5.

E ASTRONAUTS

them. One of the only songs he could remember was 'Broken Heart'.

At the end of 1995, Jason relocated to Moles Studio in Bath and wrote 14 songs in 11 days. Whereas previously he'd always believed that songs were to be found floating through the air, this time he just sat down and wrote. Perhaps because on this occasion he knew exactly what the themes of the record should be. There's certainly no doubt that what finally emerged as 'Ladies And Gentlemen…' is an intensely concentrated experience.

For the first time on a Spiritualized album, there is a straightforward portrayal of drugs. Whereas previously a song like 'Medication' could conceivably have been about addiction in general, 'I Think I'm Falling In Love' with its reference to, "*love in the middle of a afternoon, just me and a spike in my arm and my spoon*" could surely only be about heroin?

"I guess so," admits Jason reluctantly, "but it's written in a way that's qualified by the line, '*And I got nothing.*' What can I say? There's nothing glamorous about it."

But it's not an isolated example: during 'Cop Shoot Cop' you sing about the, "*hole in my arm where all the money goes*", while 'Come Together' refers to a, "*f—ed up boy who dulled the pain and killed the joy*". What are we to conclude about the circumstances in which this album was made?

A puff of smoke and a smile.

"Look, those themes have been running from the beginning, they've been there since 'Walkin' With Jesus' (*from his former band Spacemen 3's album, 'The Perfect Prescription'*). Maybe those themes are more honed on this record, but listen to it. You can hear 'Cop Shoot Cop' and hear the first line and assume that it can only be about one thing, but the rest of the song goes way off from there.

"When we were working with Dr John, he said, 'This is the shit, man, but it's not just about the shit. It's about so much more than that.' It's not like saying this is how we were on April 5 at five in the afternoon or whatever. That's not how it works. This is a studio album, the songs are not live recordings, and they're not records of a particular day, time or date.

"These songs are taking so much more than that, they're taking a whole life and if they didn't do that then they'd have no soul. I've always said it's got to be soul music. Good music is soul music. Yes, it's emotive, but that's what all music should be like."

Jason reaches over for the wine and pours himself another glass. For a moment there's silence. Should the contents of this album be even a partial reflection of his own life, you can understand the hesitation.

Kate Radley and Jason Pierce: ladies and gentlemen we are, er, sat on grass, actually

After all, the second overpowering theme of this record is of a broken heart and a soul laid bare, of a collapsing relationship and an inability to carry on without that person.

It contains the sort of graphic revelations that you'd struggle to tell your closest friends, it outlines a love so strong in its intensity that its demise threatens to destroy the one rejected. And inevitably that shifts the focus towards Jason's own relationship with Kate Radley. Spiritualized's keyboardist and Jason's (once?) partner is absent today. A natural conclusion from listening to the record would be that a split from her left Jason devastated.

"Hmmm," volunteers Jason picking at the bedspread. "You only know what you perceive from the music. I'd rather you didn't make the inference from the lyrics so literal. There was more than one person involved. There was Kate, Sean (*Cook, bassist*), Damon (*Reece, drums*), John Coxon (*sometime guitarist, currently concentrating on his Spring Heel Jack drum'n'bass project*), Dr John, all of that shit was going on. This music is not to be listened to as a document of what happened.

"I'd rather not eat than release a shit record. No compromises mean being able to suffer."

"You shouldn't assume this is what Jason's like, or this is what Mr Spaceman does with his days. You're putting too much importance on me. 'Broken Heart' is not such a weird emotion, it's not such a unique thing. You say this is a terrible song about Jason breaking

CONTINUES OVER

SPIRITUALIZED
F—ed Up Inside ***(Dedicated limited-edition LP, 1993)***

MORE FEISTINESS, as Jason's avowed intention to highlight the *rock* side of his band results in this mail-order only souvenir of their marvellous Glastonbury '92 show. In the first sign of obsessive packaging fetishism, the album is delayed for months until the cover – featuring a shiny silver effects pedal – is exactly right.

SPIRITUALIZED ELECTRIC MAINLINE
Let It Flow ***(Dedicated single, 1995)***

GOSPEL VIBES ahoy on the first single from the newly name-expanded band. With hindsight, chiefly remarkable for the B-sides – the epic, heartbroken glide of 'Don't Go (Stay With Me)' and 'The Individual''s seismic horn drone – which are destined to become cornerstones of 'Ladies And Gentlemen….

SPIRITUALIZED ELECTRIC MAINLINE
Pure Phase ***(Dedicated LP, 1995)***

A MARVELLOUS, if decidedly schizoid second album proper. On the one hand, some of Jason's most driven and demented rock'n'roll. On the other, some of his most delicate music: Michael Nyman associates The Balanescu Quartet conspire on several neo-classical tracks, while there are long ambient passages that betray his new interest in techno. Crazed packaging concept: a glow-in-the-dark green plastic box. Crazed mixing concept: two different mono mixes of the entire album, one coming out of each speaker. *Wow!*

SPIRITUALIZED ELECTRIC MAINLINE
Pure Phase Tones For DJs ***(Dedicated limited-edition LP, 1996)***

JASON'S AMBIENT experiments reach their natural end: two sides consisting of deep space humming noises, to be played at 33 or 45rpm for that essential variable humming speed. Quite soothing, actually.

SPIRITUALIZED
Ladies And Gentlemen We Are Floating In Space ***(Dedicated LP, 1997)***

THE NAME'S shortened again from ten syllables to a more manageable five. The title's cribbed from Jostein Gaarder's rather good child's guide to philosophy, *Sophie's World*. The packaging's designed to look like a prescription pharmaceutical box. The 12 songs trace an emotional arc from falling in love (the opening title track borrows heavily from Elvis' 'Can't Help Falling In Love'), through desolate fall-out, to, finally, some kind of spiritual redemption. The verdict? Album Of The Year.

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Pasture best! Spiritualized's (l-r) Jason, Damon, Dean and Kate

FROM PREVIOUS PAGE

up and I say, 'F— it is.'"

What did your parents think when they heard this record?

"I don't know. They haven't heard it. I'm not talking about that either."

He says this with finality. A little later, though, he adds that as far as Kate's concerned, "I love her dearly and she loves me dearly. Simple fact." And of course she's still a member of the band, and Jason lives with her parents in nearby Chippenham. Perhaps a resolution has been reached. Even if Kate does live in London.

"Baby, if you lose your love/Don't take me by surprise/Don't think you're crying/But there's teardrops in your eyes/If you got to leave/You've got to leave" – 'Cool Waves'

THE SOUND had to match the subject matter. Sitting in the studio, at the start of 1996, Jason Pierce knew he was about to embark on a new quest. He was determined to make these songs sound like nothing else. And that was the start of a draining and obsessive 12-month period, which saw him traverse the globe searching for the perfect noise.

In March, he flew to New York and that was where the Spaceman met up with the Night Tripper for the first time. Dr John, the 56-year-old embodiment of the voodoo blues, had agreed to play piano on the 16-minute 'Cop Shoot Cop' and

"Music is the most important thing in my life. I'll pursue whatever means are necessary and there's always the possibility that something bad might happen."

Jason was amazed.

"Him saying yes was almost enough in itself," he admits. "I just wasn't prepared for how blown away he was, and how many suggestions he had for making it better. It was his idea to sing on it and play the British National Anthem in the middle of it. He just kept saying, 'This is the shit. This is the shit.'"

From there, Jason jetted to Memphis to hang out with the legendary Jim Dickinson, the producer of everyone from Tav Falco to Alex Chilton as well as being the pianist on The Rolling Stones' 'Wild Horses'. Here was another of Jason's heroes and another individual to have a dramatic impact on the album – although this time without even touching it.

"Jim only altered it in that he altered my perceptions of it," explains Jason. "He said that it should be 'brown and fuzzy'. Now it's difficult to explain what that means, you either get it or you don't. But just to have him say, 'I haven't heard shit like this for 17 years,' was an amazing honour.

"And after seeing him and Dr John, I knew I couldn't put this together in a rough or contemporary way, I had to get this thing to sound brown or fuzzy, just to make it deserving of having their names on it. I just had to do it."

Jason returned to England and began to search. Mixers were presented and rejected with startling speed. All the time, Jason had this sound in his head, this feeling, that he couldn't communicate with anyone else. Brian Eno announced he was too busy to help, and the frustrations began to build. Eventually, Jason locked himself in the studio and began to work on it himself. And at the end of 1996, after a two-year struggle, the album was finally completed. Jason had put everything into this recording.

"That's true," he agrees, fiddling frantically with his cigarette packet, "but then I'd rather not eat than release a shit record. No compromises mean being able to suffer.

"I put the last album in a glow-in-the-dark box purely as a statement to say that music is precious. It shouldn't be sold using the cheapest materials. If you don't bother with that, it's almost like admitting your music is bad."

Did this process affect your health?

"Yes, at certain times, doing this does make me ill. That's why this album took two years to make, it's not easy to knock these things out, you know. Music is the most important thing in my life. I'll pursue whatever means are necessary and there's always the possibility that something bad might happen."

One day, then, you'll destroy yourself with your own music?

"I don't know about that," he says with a wicked cackle. "I've got a strong constitution. And anyway, you've got to be pretty stupid to jump off a cliff, haven't you?"

Another question successfully evaded.

"Life sure is weird, but what else have I to know?" – Sway

THE NEXT morning, Jason invites us to view his domestic arrangements. In bright sunshine, we are led into the Georgian mansion which has been his home for the past two years. In the kitchen we find Jason sipping on a cup of tea, listening to Van Morrison's 'Astral Weeks' and conversing quietly with Kate's stepfather. Still without sleep and having carried on drinking wine after returning from the hotel, his eyes remain sharp and attentive.

The two of them are discussing the General Election. Fiddling with a pipe and preparing to immerse himself in a pile of psychological dissertations, Kate's stepfather is sipping on a beer and asking innumerable questions about specific seats. Jason softly replies, and occasionally strokes the household cat.

This is his home – and it's difficult to equate its amiable atmosphere with the despairing soul at the centre of 'Ladies And Gentlemen…'. Is this really the resting place of the broken-hearted addict who haunts every track of that album? It's impossible to say. That character – either real or imagined – seems to have departed the scene a long time ago.

All that's left is the Jason Pierce sitting before us today: the musical obsessive, sonic adventurer and self-confessed stately horse; a man with a head full of sound and a heart full of secrets; the author of an album as emotionally traumatic and musically vast as any other in living memory; and the owner of one of the world's most prepossessing smiles.

It's noon, and his job is done. It wasn't easy answering those questions, at times they pricked bad memories, but he remained in control. There was only so much information he was ever prepared to let you have. As for the real story? Well, that remains buried deep within his soul. And if you really want to find out what happened, then you'll just have to listen to the album.